

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The following was written by the Rev. Wilfrid H. Bourne who entered the Methodist ministry in 1922 after active service in World War I. He has written a number of devotional books and smaller publications, many of them on the subject of Christian Wholeness, and Healing. Since the knowledge of his telephone ministry, which is described here, became widespread in Great Britain, he has been called "The Telephone Parson", and it is often by this name that he is addressed when answering his telephone's summons. His pioneer work in Telephone Evangelism has been the subject of T.V. and European broadcasts.

TELEPHONE EVANGELISM AND COUNSELLING

Amongst the means of constant public Christian witness in Great Britain are two very highly valued religious services known respectively as the B.B.C. daily "Lift Up Your Hearts!" morning five minutes of spiritual counsel, and the "Wayside Pulpit" pithy sentence, printed on an attractive poster, and displayed by a weekly change of message outside some thousands of churches. There is a third message of a similar kind that is given once a week by the B.B.C., and known as "The Silver Lining".

One day it occurred to me that there was room for a different service of this sort which could be much more individual and private. The minister's telephone, it seemed to me, could be used effectively in such a way. Something much shorter than a five minute's talk, and rather longer than the wayside pulpit sentence, could be prepared by any minister led to do so, and be available for any troubled person who knew where to seek it.

After a short period of experimentation I consulted the editor of the local newspaper in Bradford, Yorkshire, where I was then at work as a Methodist minister, and he very willingly gave excellent notice of the existence of my "new look in evangelism". As a result a stream of telephone callers began to ring me up at all hours of the day to hear what I termed a "Tonic Thought", and thousands of times either my wife or I have read the prepared daily thought to them.

A method of personal evangelism thus began which has always had the invaluable asset of being entirely private to the person dialling my telephone number. It was impressed upon all who contemplated asking for the daily message that they would never be asked to supply any information about themselves, or their difficulty. The service was to be anonymous so far as the seeker was concerned. This provision undoubtedly led large numbers of men and women, from all parts of the British Isles, first to ask for the prepared Tonic Thought, and then, in numerous instances, to tell their story and ask for counsel. Later on Messrs Arthur James Ltd., the well-known British religious publishers, invited me to write a book about this witness. I did

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so and the book, entitled "God Gave Me A Telephone!" (12/6) was the result. In addition there were many who sought a collected variety of these Tonic Thoughts, waiving their anonymity for this purpose, and so a series of booklets has also been privately published, containing selections, and these have exhausted editions totalling many thousands of copies.

The adventure in evangelism of a new kind was an immediate success and so it has remained after several years.

As an example of these daily changes of message, often read to scores of inquirers on each day of their availability, here is a selection of those given in the first months.

"Every new experience in life can be entered with confidence. We can walk fresh roads in faith and expectancy. We can meet new persons with joy. As we guard against the thoughtless word of the impatient action from ourselves, we shall be rooted and grounded in peace. Give thanks to God that all things become new!"

"Just let go of all tension and strife. Think of yourself as a responsible person, one who refuses to be disturbed by the events of life, however unexpected, and however calamitous they may seem to be. Affirm the goodwill of God! Know this, that all whose minds are stayed on God are kept in perfect peace".

"Follow the true pattern of your life! If you do not know what this is, God will tell you. His perfect will for us is made known for the asking. Simply become quiet in His Presence, and affirm, 'God now sends out His light and His truth, and they lead me'."

In course of time the Tonic Thoughts were amplified for callers who wished to hear a rather longer version of the same spiritual philosophies, though there has always been a standby in the shape of the shorter, more pointed message as well. Here are two of the longer affirmations as they have been telephoned:

"Every step of my way is guided as I continue to turn to God the Father for wisdom. Each day brings fresh decisions to make and new difficulties to solve. Yet none is so big that the Divine Wisdom cannot reveal the right steps to be taken by me. Always, God's intelligence fills my mind. Counsel and direction are mine as my trust is firm. Anxious thoughts find swift release and fears and forebodings are dispersed. I am surrounded by deliverances, and guarded by unseen powers of grace, glory, and goodness."

"Why should I strain against the darkness, or try to fight with shadows? This is what I attempt when the thought of sickness, or advancing years, even death itself, brings a chill to my heart. It is never my duty to do anything that is beyond my reach or my strength at any time, nor is it my duty to do today what is really tomorrow's job. It is never right to hurry when time is ample, or to be resentful in any circumstances. When I face life fairly, and release myself into the hands of God, I have power from Him sufficient to raise me above all adverse influences. When I am still, I know that He is God."

Some very interesting facts have shown themselves to me throughout the whole period of my telephone evangelism. One very significant fact will not be a surprise to preachers! It is this, that so very often the Tonic Thoughts I myself would consider to be trite, and even meaningless, on due reflection

after they had been "thrown off" the anvil of their first inspiration, have proved to be the very messages that anonymous seekers have prayed to God to receive! Again and again, when the reading of such a prepared message in the hearing of a caller has seemed tame and without life to me, it has been seized by the listener with most affecting gratitude. In fact, I have often been asked weeks later to go back to certain daily messages and read them over again, as well the current Tonic Thought, yet I would have dismissed even my own creation as unworthy of a single reading, let alone a repeated one!

Another of these facts has been the requests of national and local editors to be supplied with Tonic Thoughts for their journals, sometimes by the column. They have considered winged messages of this order to possess more value than that of the fugitive thought. One county newspaper prints a Tonic Thought, as already telephoned, each week, so that its thousands of homefast readers who have no telephones may read it instead. This weekly affirmation is given pride of place on the paper's magazine page and bordered by inset lines that show it up immediately that page is reached by the reader.

The spiritual consequences of these varieties of the same evangelism are deep, and many, as I have good reason to know. Many would-be suicides have told me of their arrested intentions. Numerous requests for the Tonic Thought have been followed by requests for immediate counselling, though, obviously, the opportunity for effective service in this direction is severely limited in the circumstances. The requests, by the way, are usually prefixed with a suggested formula that avoids the necessity for self-disclosure of identify. This formula is either, "Give me the word for today", or, "May I have the Tonic Thought?"

Behind these thousands of anonymous calls there are stories of heartache and heartbreak, desertion, betrayal, illness, fear, anxiety, failure, sin, and many a sorrow. Often they are told to me, or to my wife. To them the freshly minted affirmation offers an introduction to their confession, or their unfolding. Dr W.E. Sangster, who wrote an introduction to my first printed collection of Tonic Thoughts which had all been read countless times in this way, said that "every Christian aches at times with the thought of the millions of people who do not know Christ. There are many in the world, still, who do not know His name, but there are many more who live in Christian lands and know His Name -- but not Him! The Church stands open and welcoming, but they do not come. Some are shy, and some are ashamed, and some have come and not found what they sought. Many are without God and without hope in the world. The task of evangelism is to reach these people. They are of all kinds. What reaches one will not reach another but any new way must be welcomed if it really does the work. I know people, untouched by the normal ministrations of the Church, who have been brought by grace through my friend's telephone ministry into fellowship with God and radically changed. I have known the fearful find courage and the despairing hope again. Led by the Spirit of God he has opened another channel of ministry. He seeks from God a Bible-based Tonic Thought each day and offers to share it with anyone who will ring his telephone and ask. Hundreds ask! It is a channel of faith, hope, and love to a multitude. I do not believe this is a ministry for everyone. Some men, splendidly extended for God in other ways, will feel no call to it, but they rejoice, as I do, that there are those eager to do this work. I wish that every town and city had such a service. We cannot, in our extremities, ring up heaven, but it is good to have in the community someone who listens to God with the troubled most in mind, and who is ready to relay the message as they call."

Night after night, when the last call has been made, I have knelt down and thanked God for the gift of a telephone! My study has become a sanctuary by its presence. A brief message, through a modern instrument which laughs at space and distance, can be evangelism directed where it is sought and wanted. I am sure that in every instance the problems put to me after the day's Tonic Thought has given encouragement to the opening, have either been rooted in a limited understanding of faith, or in a limited trust, or in a bewildered soul. The frequent requests for the Tonic Thought seem to be in response to God's quiet urging to seek His answer to the problem, whether or not there has been an intention, to begin with, to discuss that difficulty. The would-be suicides have felt this unconscious hunger for God Himself.

There have been evangelical conversions through this ministry, for every now and then I have been told so, though not always with the divulging of the identity of the converted person. Many have told me that the new orientation they have experienced as a result of hearing so strangely directed a message has sent them back to their own churches after years of absence. And, I have been deeply happy to find, many reconciliations have followed between estranged husbands and wives, parents and children, and others.

In this service, I feel, one is not so much a worker for God as a fellow-worker together with Him. There is a great difference. If we merely work for Him we can demand a finished product as the reward of our toil. If we work with Him, we demand nothing except to serve with Him still. We go on, answering the calls as they come, giving the message when this is sought, speaking as we feel He leads us to speak, commending every nameless soul to His mercy and wisdom, praying that He Who sees in secret will reward them in His way.

None of the needs referred to me by the ministry of the telephone could ever be considered exceptional in the sense of isolated, rare experiences of suffering or hardship, difficulty or dismay. Every one is shared by many. Only here and there one meets with a really sensational problem, if it can be so termed. Everyday life complications are the rule of this telephone pastoral aid, and in this service for Christ little time is ever allowed for sorting out the tangled circumstances of the caller, or analysing the very real confessions that are made. One has to take a plunge into the very heart of the confidence with an affirmative answer. Furthermore, if the telephone is to be life-changing and Christ-offering, the answer given must be ready and unhesitating. Never is it truer than here that "he who hesitates is lost". The reply must be positive as well as unhesitating and brief, falling into an affirmation of the power of Christ to redeem, to release, and to make whole once more. We can be sure that no caller who has voluntarily sought our word will regard the short and pointed answer as being slick or unctuous.

The telephone can provide an opportunity for evangelism that can only be described as a new deal for home missions. Our business at the listening end of God's telephone is to hear what is said, then to speak, after that to leave it all quietly to God.

There are one or two conclusions to be drawn from this new channel of ministry. No Christian service could more fitly be described as "unfinished business". So often the Tonic Thought is like Longfellow's The Arrow And The Song "...I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth I knew not where". Though a happy conclusion may sometimes be known, the preponderant experience is of present ignorance, for the message sought has been given to an entirely anonymous inquirer, and there is no possible means of following it up. Another discovery we make is that the public telephone booth frequently becomes

a confessional! I have often found that guilty people, seeking a moral catharsis, have seized the public telephone receiver and then asked for the current Tonic Thought, chiefly as a prelude to their outpouring of guilt into an ear that is ready to listen, whilst they themselves can preserve their privacy of identity. This itself is an amazingly valuable piece of telephone ministry, for its therapeutic usefulness is obvious.

Mr. Bourne writes that he will gladly send copies of his latest booklet ("Healing Tonic Thoughts") about this personal service for the Kingdom of God to anyone who is interested, though it would reduce his postage bill greatly if an international reply coupon is enclosed with the request. His address is: Aldersgate, 6, Murray Road, Selsey-on-Sea, Sussex.